

2 CORINTHIANS 3-4 CONVERTING THE OLD COVENANT INTO THE NEW COVENANT



Beset by Judaizers who question his credentials, Paul explains in 2 Cor. 3 how a new administration of God's law under the New Covenant represents *a new era and ministry* God had promised His people. This pact is more than divine words etched externally on stone tablets which, in reality, Israel didn't have the heart to obey (Deut. 5:29). This is the *initial stage* in which, through God's Spirit, He would *begin to inscribe His Law* upon one's heart.

Now, Paul had been a Pharisee scrupulously keeping every ritual required by the Old Covenant law and made harsher by rabbinical traditions. Yet, it had failed to bring about an inner conversion and he admits he had been very carnal (1 Tim. 1:13).

This is why he is so adamant in condemning the distorted manner in which God's law was being administered under the prevailing Judaism. At the same time, he was battling Gnostic "grace versus law Christians" who later used 2 Cor. 3 as a "Trojan horse" to try to undermine God's law (Jude 3-4).

He starts by contrasting the Old Covenant with the New: "Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or *do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you* or letters of commendation from you? You are *our epistle* written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, *ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart*. And we have such *trust through Christ toward God*. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but *our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new* [Gk. *kainos--renewed*] *covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*" (2 Cor. 3:1-6).

Paul is explaining the transition from the Old Covenant to the New brought about *by the death and resurrection of Christ* (as the new Testator, Heb. 9:15-17) and accepted by those exercising a saving faith. So, the Old Covenant's glory from God gives way to a superior glory of the New Covenant now available to converted, Spirit-filled people of all nations—with no exceptions (Acts 10:34-36, 43).

Clearly, the Old Covenant had not achieved the desired outcome due to the carnal weakness of the Israelites (Rom. 8:3). Now that God's people—His

Church—have access to the Holy Spirit, a new administration or ministry can come into effect.

This new administration, with spirit-led people, does not condemn the sinner to death, as was the case under the Levitical Old Covenant system of judges. That is why Paul goes on to say: "But if the *ministry of death* [due to the death penalty applied for many laws broken], written and engraved on stones, *was glorious*, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory *was passing away*, how will *the ministry of the Spirit* not *be more glorious*? For if the *ministry of condemnation* [with its accompanying death sentence for many sins] had glory, the *ministry of righteousness* [based on God's Spirit, grace and obedience to God's law (Rom. 7:12)] exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of *the glory that excels* [just as the brilliance of the moon is superseded by the sun's brightness]. For *if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious*" (2 Cor. 3:7-11),

A useful analogy here for understanding God's expanded covenants is *a set of different sized boxes* where one box fits inside *a larger one*. Thus, each covenant fits into the next *renewed* (Gk. *kainos, not neos*) and *expanded* version of His Plan of Salvation.

For instance, God's covenant with Adam and Eve is called *the Edenic Covenant*. As we read in Hosea 6:7, "But *like Adam*, you broke *my covenant* and *betrayed* my trust" (NLT). This pact is still binding, for what occurred in Eden still affects us. We continue to work by the sweat of our brow, women still give birth in pain, and we still die because of sin. The access to eternal life—symbolized by the tree of life in Eden—was banned for humanity. Yet, in Rev. 22:2, we see a similar tree of life, signifying the access granted, in stages, to all humans who accept God's way and will receive eternal life.

Now, the covenant with Adam and Eve is fit within the subsequent covenant God made with Noah. This is *the Noachian Covenant* where new elements were added—such as specific rules of conduct (Genesis 9:2-9)—and God gives the *rainbow as a promise* that He will never again destroy humanity by means of a flood. We certainly are thankful that this promise still remains in effect!

Next comes *the Abrahamic Covenant*, which includes all the elements of the previous covenants but modifies them and adds more, such as the sign of circumcision for this pact and God's promises of a lineage through Isaac and that Abraham would be the heir of the world to come (Romans 4:13).

Next is *the Sinaitic covenant*, which incorporates previous elements but expands the laws to include a national government and a ritual law added due to sins (Jer. 7:22). It contains all the laws necessary for the Israelites to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6) and especially, the Ten Commandments, but they were not faithful to it.

We later have *the Davidic Covenant*, where elements are added about David's heirs sitting in the throne of Judah until Christ's coming (2 Sam. 7)

Finally, there is *the New Covenant*, which incorporates and modifies the previous statutes while adding many new elements. It now includes the power to enable the fulfillment of the Old Covenant in a spiritual sense—something that was not possible for the great majority of Israelites.

God had prophesied it was in His plan to introduce *this renewed covenant* in the future. Jer. 31:31-33 states: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Eternal, when I will make *a new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt [the Sinaitic covenant], because they broke My covenant, though I was a husband to them, says the Eternal. But *this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days*, says the Eternal: *I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*" Hebrews 8:8-12 repeats this about the New Covenant. Yet we should note that the *ultimate fulfillment* of this pact will be when *we are born again in God's kingdom*.

It is with this backdrop that we can fully understand what Paul is saying here, and precisely how these same principles are revealed in Jer. 31, Ez. 31 and 36. Far from being something radical, the New Covenant is what God had prophesied centuries earlier and had been His plan all along.

The old administration of God's law under the Sinaitic covenant is now superseded by the new administration—as Paul puts it, by "ministers of the new covenant"—and he continues, "not of the letter

but of the Spirit; for the letter kills [by condemning the sinner to death], but the Spirit gives life" (v. 6).

Now, ministers of the New Covenant don't have to sentence to death someone who works on the Sabbath, as was the case before (Ex. 35:2). Under the new administration of God's laws—as Paul himself applied in 1 Cor. 5—the sinner who committed fornication is suspended from Church until he has ceased committing those sins, has repented from the heart and is reintegrated. That is why, now, "the Spirit [in the end] gives life."

Yet, it is important to emphasize the following: "The law has not been cancelled by gospel," states *The New Bible Commentary*, "for this indeed now provides *the means of fulfilling it*, through the power of *the risen Christ within the believer* (Rom. 10:4)...The new covenant requires *ministers qualified by God's Spirit* (1 Tim. 1:12-14). The old written code (Ex. 24) demanded a standard impossible to reach unaided. But the New Covenant inaugurated by Christ (1 Cor. 11:25) also offers man the *spiritual ability* to keep it" (p. 1078).

This Old Covenant is now ready to be modified and incorporated into the New Covenant, retaining many of its earlier elements but altered by the new and better conditions (Heb. 10:19-23) of administering God's law which is still holy, just and good (Rom. 7:12).

Paul continues: "Therefore, *since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech*—unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, *when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart*. Nevertheless, when one turns to the Lord, *the veil is taken away*" (2 Cor. 3:12-16).

The problem, as we can see, lies not with the Old Covenant itself but with the unconverted hearts of the Israelites and the administration of the law without God's Spirit in one that prevented them from correctly understanding the law, nor did they have the power and capacity to fulfill it properly.

Note that once a person is converted, *the veil is removed*—now he can understand the Old Covenant is spiritually fitted into the New Covenant, with new features added and with better promises (Heb. 8:6).

Paul continues: “Now the *Lord is the Spirit*; and *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, *are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory*, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

So, the Old Covenant has been incorporated into a newer and better covenant leading to a spiritual freedom within God’s law, rather than to slavery or condemnation for sins and death. Through this New Covenant, we are gradually being transformed by the work of God’s Spirit into being more like Christ.

As Rom. 8:1–4 explains, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from *the law of sin and death*. For what the law could not do in that it was *weak through the flesh*, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that *the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit* [in us].”

Also, this same theme is found in the book of Galatians, where the New Covenant is constantly being contrasted with the Old Covenant and its required rituals. There, the Old Covenant under the Rabbinic administration in Jerusalem is compared with *the bondslave Hagar and her son Ishmael* and the New Covenant to *Sarah and Isaac* who were persecuted by them, as the Rabbis did to Paul and the Christian Church (Gal. 4:28-31).

Now, in *chapter 4*, Paul continues with the same theme: “Therefore, since *through God’s mercy we have this ministry*, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. *On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God*” (2 Cor. 4:1–2).

Note that Paul continues to attack those who are twisting the Scriptures—these false teachers who claim to be apostles. In reality, they were agents of Satan working to prevent the establishment of the better and superior covenant that Paul preaches. All true apostles would oppose these false apostles (2 Cor. 11:13; 2 Pet. 2:1-2).

Christ also prophetically says to this first stage of Church, what we call the Ephesus Era: “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that *you cannot bear those who are evil*. And *you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars*” (Rev. 2:2).

Paul then reveals the real source of these lying impostors: “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds *the god of this age* has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:3-5). Here we see the truth that the world follows “the god of this age” or Satan, without realizing it.

How does Paul describe these precious truths we possess? He says: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair...For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh... knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you” (2 Cor. 4:7-14).

In reality, we are not worthy to be bearers of these truths, which are transmitted by imperfect and weak persons. Nevertheless, God is using us to bring this glorious gospel to the world. That is why we must stay close to God and not be discouraged.

As Paul brings out, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us *a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory* [the creation of spiritual character], while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

So, we need to be renewed daily through prayer, meditation and Bible study. In this way, God can renew our spiritual life. The trials we undergo serve to develop that precious spiritual character. This is the great goal of the Christian life--and for which we will be judged in that future resurrection.